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ABSTRACT

Public affairs instructors must routinely contend with the reality that stressing the importance of political knowledge is challenging in an era of declining student interest in politics and political institutions. Yet enhancing students' knowledge about public affairs can stimulate more interest and engagement in public affairs, particularly if instructors illustrate the importance of political ideology in public affairs. Since one of the most fundamental questions in U.S. political history centers around the proper role of the federal government in society, students' interest in public affairs can be enhanced by assisting them in discovering their own political identities in an ideological sense. This enrichment of political knowledge is instrumental in attempting to promote a greater understanding of the relevance and importance of public affairs to students' lives and those of their peers. (Contains 12 references, and tables on American adult political knowledge, college freshman attitudes, and questions for students about public affairs and public officials.) (Author/LB)

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Stressing the Importance of Public Affairs Knowledge in an Era of Declining Political Interest

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Abstract

Public affairs instructors must routinely contend with the reality that stressing the importance of political knowledge is challenging in an era of declining student interest in politics and political institutions. Yet enhancing students' knowledge about public affairs can stimulate more interest and engagement in public affairs, particularly if instructors illustrate the importance of political ideology in public affairs. Since one of the most fundamental questions in American political history centers around the proper role of the federal government in society, students' interest in public affairs can be enhanced by assisting them in discovering their own political identities in an ideological sense. This enrichment of political knowledge is instrumental in attempting to promote a greater understanding of the relevance and importance of public affairs to students' lives and those of their peers.

Instructors in public affairs broadly defined, (i.e., political science, policy analysis, public administration, public management, and public policy) routinely have to contend with the reality that their students, and particularly non-majors, know very little about public affairs issues and lack fundamental knowledge about the American political system. Most Americans are not particularly interested in politics and perceive that there is little relationship between decision making in Washington, D.C. or their state capitals and their daily lives. This misguided perception represents an important challenge for all instructors in public affairs–to assist students in understanding the importance of political and policy knowledge so that as citizens of a democracy, they can be better situated to promote accountability in the public sector. This is of course compounded by the fact that Americans have developed less faith in public institutions over the last few decades at all levels of government. Thus a profound instructional perplexity exists: stressing the crucial significance of knowledge-based public affairs education in an era of declining interest and confidence in politics, politicians, and government institutions.

Political Knowledge in the United States

In 1995, *The Washington Post*, Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University conducted a national poll of adult political knowledge. The results were consistent with earlier findings that suggested that Americans know shockingly little about public affairs and politics. Selected questions and responses are included in Table 1.

Table 1 here

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94 percent of Americans did not know that William Rehnquist was chief justice; 66 percent did not know that Robert Dole was the majority leader of the Senate (he was also a leading

Republican candidate for the presidency); 47 percent did not know that Newt Gingrich was speaker of the House in spite of the fact that he was "Man of the Year" for *Time* in 1995; and 40 percent did not know that Al Gore was vice president (the poll was taken at the end of 1995). These figures are quite disturbing considering that the elected officials involved all received a significant amount of press coverage as leaders in the legislative branch, as well as the second-ranking executive official in the United States. Americans typically know even less about the federal judiciary, which helps to explain that the vast majority of adults cannot identify the most powerful jurist in the nation.

Explaining the Low Level of Knowledge

Since most Americans do not know much about politics or public affairs issues, does this mean that the mass public, including many students enrolled in American colleges and universities, are ignorant and incompetent? Absolutely not. For most people, politics is unimportant. Americans are far more likely to know about figures in entertainment and sports than those in politics. This is obviously one of the many challenges facing instructors–to assist students in understanding the linkage between what transpires in the political arena and their own lives. For most Americans, politics ranks far behind many other activities as a source of entertainment. According to Neuman (1986), only about five percent of the American population are politically active and highly sophisticated, which is about the same as other Western democracies. In his theory of three publics, Neuman argues that twenty percent of Americans "are a self-consistent and unabashedly apolitical lot" (1986:170). The vast majority of the population (seventy-five percent) are "marginally attentive to politics and mildly cynical about the behavior of politicians, but they accept the duty to vote, and they do so with great regularity" (1986:170).

To some, particularly Page and Shapiro (1992), this is not particularly problematic. Though they do not dispute the fact that most Americans are relatively ignorant about public affairs, they nevertheless offer the following paradigm:

> While we grant the rational ignorance of most individuals, and the possibility that their policy preferences are shallow and unstable, we maintain that public opinion as a *collective* phenomenon is nonetheless stable (though not immovable), meaningful, and indeed rational in a higher, if somewhat, looser, sense: it is able to make distinctions; it is organized in coherent patterns; it is reasonable, based on the best available information; and it is adaptive to new information or changed circumstances, responding in similar ways to similar stimuli (Page & Shapiro, 1992:14).

The authors maintain that American public opinion is more politically sophisticated over time than it is in studies that focus purely on individuals. In their analysis of surveys from 1935 to 1990, Page and Shapiro (1992) certainly demonstrate the public opinion is stable over time. But their conclusion that citizens have a limited need for political knowledge is fundamentally flawed. Political knowledge is a *sine qua non* for a more informed discourse of the great issues of the day. The fact that public opinion is typically constant in the absence of dramatic circumstances does not support the conclusion that limited knowledge is particularly advantageous. A heightened awareness in many ways expands democratic accountability and promotes citizenship which may stimulate more interest and confidence in the political process for it is far easier for an ignorant

public to hold negative opinions than one that truly understands the inherent complexities of government and governance, particularly in a constitutional system of separation of powers and checks and balances.

Declining Political Interest on American College Campuses

Officials at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California at Los Angeles have been surveying attitudes of college freshmen since 1966. The annual freshman survey is the longest-standing and most comprehensive assessment of student attitudes and plans in the nation. The fall 1995 survey covered 323,791 students representing the entering freshman class at 641 two and four-year colleges and universities. Of these, 240,082 questionnaires from 473 institutions were returned. The returned forms were used to compute the 1995 national norms by statistically adjusting them to represent the approximately 1.5 million first-time entering freshman (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1995:320). In their thirtieth annual survey, Sax, Astin, Korn, and Mahoney report that political interest and engagement continues to drop in the United States. Included in Table 2 is a brief summary of some important findings.

Table 2 here

The students' commitment to "keeping up to date with political affairs" declined by almost thirty percent over this thirty year period. The proportion who discuss politics frequently declined by more than half over the same era. According to the survey director Alexander Astin, "[t]his continuing erosion of students' political interest and engagement should be a red flag to all of us who believe in the democratic process" (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1995:320). Clearly, students in the mid-1960s were more actively engaged in politics and public affairs than their

contemporary counterparts. So what is the public affairs instructor to do, considering the general lack of knowledge that exists in the United States about politics and the fact that the vast majority do not perceive politics to be important? Obviously, there is no singular remedy, but a partial way to help alleviate this troubling dichotomy lies in an old educational approach.

Stressing the Fundamentals: The Importance of a Knowledge-Based Education, Particularly for Students in Introductory Courses

Though there are critics of knowledge-based education, it seems to me that students in relevant majors should obtain a baccalaureate with a certain amount of factual information concerning public affairs and public officials. Included in Table 3 is information that should be mastered by students. The list is not designed to be exhaustive, but simply fundamental for those enrolled in introductory courses in public affairs, again broadly defined. For example, the introductory course in the system wide School of Public and Environmental Affairs in Indiana University (campuses in Bloomington, Fort Wayne, Gary, Indianapolis, Kokomo, and South Bend) is SPEA V170 (Introduction to Public Affairs). By stressing this basic information early, the student will be better equipped to comprehend the subject material in upper-level public policy, public management, public administration, and political science courses.

Table 3 here

Utilizing technology can certainly assist the instructor in this endeavor. The Internet, C-SPAN, or other video footage can readily identify the public officials in question. Furthermore, a good thorough scrutiny of the federal Constitution is always advantageous for obvious reasons.

Increasing Student Knowledge and Student Interest

Increasing students' knowledge about public affairs can indeed stimulate more interest and engagement in public affairs, particularly if instructors illustrate the importance of political ideology in public affairs. One of the most fundamental political debates in U.S. history centers around federalism and ideology:

> What is the proper role of the federal government in society?

This conflictual question was hotly contested between the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries and has been ever since. While the political players have changed (Alexander Hamilton's advocacy of a strong national government is pursued by contemporary liberals such as Richard Gephardt and Edward Kennedy; Thomas Jefferson's belief in states' rights continues with contemporary conservatives such as Richard Armey and Trent Lott), the issue is still highly salient in American politics. The political scientist Woodrow Wilson put it succinctly:

> The question of the relation of the states to the federal government is the cardinal question of our Constitutional system. It cannot be settled by the opinion of one generation, because it is a question of growth, and each successive stage of our political and economic development gives it a new aspect, makes it a new question (Wilson, 1908:173).

As the HERI survey suggests, many students are either not interested in politics or fear that they do not know enough to participate, even in a passive activity such as voting. Yet such students can be actively engaged in public affairs by understanding the relevance of ideology to their lives and to public policy making; in a sense they can "discover" themselves politically. Such a concept is not entirely novel. For example, Cochran, Mayer, Carr, and Cayer's (1999) introductory text in

public affairs includes a discussion of a wide range of perspectives (conservative to liberal to radical) in their topical examination of a multitude of substantive policy issues. In addition, interactive technology such as Baker and Losco's (1997) CD-ROM of American government assists students in not only understanding their own beliefs about public affairs, but also demonstrates to them how their views compare with those of persons of other ideological perspectives. Thus in terms of teaching methods, student interest can be stimulated by fusing ideological discussions in routine class lectures/discussions, incorporating texts that use this approach, and by promoting student discovery by utilizing technology. By way of illustration, in the chapter on public opinion in Baker and Losco's (1997) CD-ROM, students are asked "[h]ow much trust do you have in the federal government?" along with some demographical questions. Presumably, it would be expected that liberal students would be more trusting than conservatives or moderates. Their choices are a "great deal," "only some," and "hardly any." Students can then compare their opinions with the results of the National Opinion Research Center's national survey, which allows them to not only learn more about themselves politically, but also to do so in a comparative context.

Assessing Student Progress Toward the Objective

Stressing the importance of public affairs knowledge at the current time is a daunting challenge, and there is obviously no simple solution to the problem of relative student apathy in public affairs. Evaluating teaching efforts to address this situation is equally challenging, for in many ways a sophisticated means to assess teaching effectiveness has proven entirely elusive to educators in spite of good intentions. Notwithstanding this reality, a pretest and posttest survey administered to students at the very beginning of a course and at the very end may provide useful

feedback concerning two important instructional objectives: political knowledge and political interest. Measuring political knowledge is relatively straightforward–a survey similar to the one available in Table 3 can be administered. There should be a marked difference between the results obtained before the course truly begins as compared to when it concludes. Simply put, students will know much more about basic political issues and political personas than they did before they enrolled in the introductory course. The same type of survey can be utilized to assess political interest as well. Utilizing an ordinal scale, instructors can create a series of questions similar to those found in the HERI survey (e.g., students can be queried on "keeping up to date with political affairs" as an important life goal, whether they believe in "influencing social values," the extent to which they believe in "cleaning up the environment," "influencing the political structure," "promoting racial understanding," and "participating in a community action program") and a host of other questions (see Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1995). The expectation, once again, is that there would be a difference in a "positive" direction concerning political interest from the pretest to the posttest. As is true with student evaluations, the instructor should not be present and they should be administered by a third party.

Concluding Thoughts

According to Blits (1997), Alexis de Tocqueville can be properly called the first philosopher of modern democracy. Throughout *Democracy in America*, he discusses the mode and content of a democratic education, and emphasizes that such an education is indispensable to democracy. As public affairs instructors, we will not succeed in changing the survey results of political knowledge and political interest for American adults. Such an objective would be utterly quixotical, given the perceived importance of politics to many people. It is incumbent upon us,

however, to ensure that our own students graduate from baccalaureate programs well versed in the issues and public personas of the day, and in so doing attempt to assist students in understanding the relevance and importance of public affairs to their own lives and those of their peers.

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Table 1
Political Knowledge of American Adult Population

Question	Answering Correctly
1. Can you tell me who was president when the Watergate scandal took place?	86%
2. As far as you know, is there a limit on the number of terms in office a president of the United States can serve, or not?	81%
3. Can you tell me which party--the Democrats or the Republicans--has the most members in the U.S. Senate?	62%
4. Can you tell me which party--the Democrats or the Republicans--has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives?	61%
5. Can you tell me the name of the current vice president of the United States?	60%
6. As far as you know, who has the final responsibility to decide if a law is constitutional or not?	54%
7. Can you tell me the name of the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives?	53%
8. Which party do you think is more conservative--the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?	52%
9. Can you tell me the name of the current majority leader of the U.S. Senate?	34%
10. How many years is a single term in office for a U.S. senator?	26%
11. Can you tell me the name of the current chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court?	6%

Source: *The Washington Post*, January 29, 1996: p.A6. The survey is based on the results of a telephone survey of a random national selection of 1,514 adults in November and December, 1995, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Table 2
Attitudes of College Freshmen

	High	Low
1. Students' commitment to "keeping up to date with political affairs" as an important life goal.	57.8% (1966)	28.5% (1995)
2. Students' commitment to discussing politics frequently.	29.9% (1968)	14.8% (1995)

Source: L. Sax, A. Astin, W. Korn, & K. Mahoney. 1995. *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1995.* Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, p.320.

Table 3
Factual Information for Introductory Students

Public Affairs	Public Officials
1. Which political party currently has the numeric majority in the U.S. House of Representatives?	1. Who is currently the vice president of the U.S.?
2. Which political party currently has the numeric majority in the U.S. Senate?	2. Who is currently the president of the Senate?
3. How long is a term in the U.S. House of Representatives?	3. Who is currently the president *pro tempore* of the U.S. Senate?
4. How long is a term in the U.S. Senate?	4. Who is currently the majority leader of the U.S. Senate?
5. How long is a presidential term?	5. Who is currently the minority leader of the U.S. Senate?
6. How many voting members are there in the U.S. Senate?	6. Who is currently the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives?
7. How many voting members are there in the U.S. House of Representatives?	7. Who is currently the majority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives?
8. When was the U.S. Constitution written?	8. Who is currently the minority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives?
9. What is the Bill of Rights?	9. Which individual currently represents you in the U.S. House of Representatives?
10. How many times has the U.S. Constitution been amended?	10. Which individuals currently represent you in the U.S. Senate?
11. What was created by Article I of the U.S. Constitution?	11. Who is currently the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court?
12. What was created by Article II of the U.S. Constitution?	12. Who is currently the governor of your state?
13. What was created by Article III o f the U.S. Constitution?	13. Who is currently the U.S. secretary of state?
14. What is a republican form of government?	14. Who is currently the U.S. secretary of defense?
15. What is federalism?	15. Who is currently the U.S. secretary of treasury?
16. What are checks and balances and separation of powers?	16. Who is currently the U.S. attorney general?